

# aging trends in homeless populations

by dennis p. culhane, stephen metraux, thomas byrne, magdi stino, and jay bainbridge

Chronic homelessness is at a demographic crossroad. In the 30 years since homelessness in its contemporary form first manifested in U.S. cities, it has ascended to one of the most prominent American social problems. Despite the current push by advocacy organizations to end homelessness, many expect it will always be with us. However, a closer examination of age and aging in chronically homeless populations offers an opportunity to intervene.

Homelessness looked very different four decades ago: Images of skid row scenes populated with old, alcoholic men were vestiges of the depression-era and reflected the many who remained down and out through the decades of prosperity that followed World War II. As the individuals represented by this urban archetype grew older and died, researchers noted significant demographic shifts among those who were experiencing housing challenges in the early 1980s. This “new” homelessness stood at odds with skid row stereotypes. The predominant demographic groups in the new

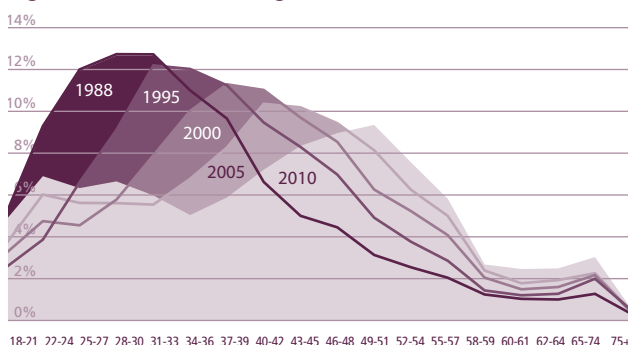
homeless population were able-bodied young men, mostly black, and young women with their children. A new generation of destitute poverty had burst forth, comprised of people primarily born between 1954 and 1967, who had the misfortune of coming of age during the double-dip recessions of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s.

Data from 22 years of New York City shelter records and from the last three decennial census enumerations show a distinct cohort effect among the single adult homeless population. The age distribution of all single adults who stayed in New York City shelters has shifted to the right over time (see chart on bottom left). In other words, this population is aging. The peak age frequencies, which ranged from 28 through 33 in 1988, have progressed to ages 46 through 51 in 2010. The single adult homeless population here consists primarily of a male, mostly minority cohort born between 1959 and 1964, the last years of the baby boom generation.

This chart does not include adults in families that are homeless. In contrast to their unaccompanied counterparts, the ages of heads of NYC families that are homeless have remained unchanged over time with a modal age in the early 20s. This suggests that heads of families experience homelessness in conjunction with the difficulties of raising young children in poverty, and that they are able to advance economically as children get older. These dynamics deserve their own assessment, however, and the focus here is on adults who are without children and chronically homeless.

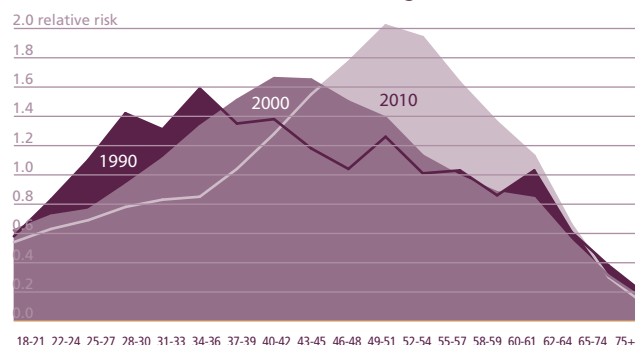
The age distributions of the homeless population are also available from the last three decennial census enumerations, and gauging the proportions of homelessness among age groups in the overall U.S. population provides the “relative risk” for each age group. Relative risk shows the degree to which a particular subgroup is at risk for experiencing an event as compared to the risk for the remaining population. Because the U.S. Census Bureau does not differentiate

Age Distribution of Single Adults in NYC shelters



Source: New York City Department of Homeless Services

Relative Risk For Shelter Use Among Adult Males in US



Source: U.S. Census

between a person being homeless as an individual or with a family, we look here only at males, who, when they experience homelessness, overwhelmingly do so as individuals. The chart on the bottom right of the previous page shows a moving bulge, or aging trend, in the ages with peak relative risk. In the 1990 census enumeration, those aged between 34 and 36 had over one and a half times the relative risk for homelessness as the rest of the U.S. population ( $RR=1.6$ ). In subsequent enumerations, the age groups with the highest relative risks for homelessness shifted to 40 to 42 ( $RR=1.7$ ) in 2000, and then to 49 to 51 ( $RR=2.0$ ) in 2010.

### aging, increasing risk, and decreasing services

A confluence of factors potentially explains this trend. This late baby boom cohort faced tightened housing and labor market conditions as they came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Depressed wages for unskilled workers, higher rates of youth and young adult unemployment, and rising rental housing costs raised the risk of housing and labor market problems for the most disadvantaged members of this cohort. Back-to-back recessions in the late 1970s and early 1980s exacerbated the problem. Among the most disadvantaged—disproportionately low-income, minority, urban youth—many never found employment in the formal labor market and instead spent much of their adult lives cycling between unemployment, working in the informal economy, and occasional stints in menial, low-paying jobs. Many of these men also spent time in drug treatment programs and/or were incarcerated which diminished their connections to the labor market and their families further. This pool of poor young adults was also expanding at a time when cutbacks to social welfare systems were weakening the safety net. Anti-poverty, child welfare, and homeless services systems were already overwhelmed and increased demands represented by this expanding population went unanswered. Instead, the corrections system rose to meet the demand.

Today, most of the men in this cohort are in their early 50s. Given a life expectancy of 64 for single men who are chronically homeless, this cohort is now approaching premature old age. The cohort that has been the bulwark of the single adult homeless population since the 1980s likely will fade into history soon. But not before issues related to the medical frailty of aging ensure that they will have one last, profound impact on the social welfare system.

### the next generation

Predictions of an overall decline in the single adult homeless population as these men age may be premature. Data from New York indicates that a new, young single adult cohort is emerging among the homeless population. Starting

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in 2000, and becoming more visible in subsequent years, is a bump among the groups in the 22 to 30 age range that suggests a new generation of homelessness. The many youth who grew up under the jurisdiction of the foster care and the juvenile justice systems are particularly at risk for chronic challenges in finding employment and housing. New veterans returning to civilian life after tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan have also been a substantial source of young adult homelessness, with recent data indicating that as many as 13,000 young veterans became homeless in 2011. States are increasingly adopting alternatives to incarceration that have led to decreases



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in the nation's prison population over the past two years, the first such decline since the 1970s. If this decline continues, large numbers of incarcerated persons will filter back into a society for which they are poorly prepared; similar to the deinstitutionalization of persons with mental illness in the latter part of the twentieth century. All these trends play against a backdrop of sustained unemployment rates of nearly 30 percent among young black and Latino adults, a level not seen since the mid-1980s.

If we wish to end homelessness among single adults, each end of this age distribution calls for different policy responses. At the older end, the needs of an aging homeless population fit well with the current policy emphasis on ending homelessness through the greater availability of permanent supportive housing. This approach combines affordable housing with support services (while bypassing the traditional shelter system) to place people who are homeless directly from the streets into their own homes. Supportive housing has been successful in housing the most chronic and recalcitrant among the homeless population (with one-year tenant retention rates typically

exceeding 85 percent), and has been a key reason why, despite the worst recession in decades, the number of chronically homeless people in the United States has declined by a third since 2005 to 110,000.

Key to countering the budding trend of homelessness among younger men is the development of a range of prevention initiatives that target at-risk populations. Researchers and service providers are becoming more adept at identifying those most likely to become homeless and targeting prevention services to them. Such approaches include the Homebase

program in New York City, which provides enough short-term emergency assistance to permit families on the verge of homelessness to weather their housing crises. Other approaches are broader and more “upstream”: seeking to reach households before they are at the shelter door. These include initiatives that provide ongoing housing, financial, and educational support for young adults who age-out of foster care placements; and veterans programs that provide a range of supports for veterans and their families in their transition from military life. But more broadly

based and systematic programs that target issues such as youth unemployment and prison reentry on a large scale need to be put into place if we are to effectively prevent another generation of homeless.

The authors are all affiliated with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ National Center for Homelessness Among Veterans. In addition, **Dennis P. Culhane** and **Thomas Byrne** are in the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania, **Stephen Metraux** and **Magdi Stino** are in Health Policy at the University of the Sciences, and **Jay Bainbridge** is in Public Administration at Marist College.

## the gun control paradox

by howard schuman and stanley presser

The massacre of 26 people in a Connecticut school, most of them young children, led to renewed calls for legislation to provide better control of guns. Even though mass shootings occur on a regular basis—6 dead in the Gabrielle Giffords shooting in Arizona, 7 dead at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, 12 dead in a movie theater in Colorado—little legislative change occurs. Historically, despite considerable public outcry immediately following these horrific events, attention to gun control quickly fades. Yet according to the widely respected General Social Survey (GSS), support for requiring a police permit to buy a gun remains greater than opposition to it by three to one. Given this support for greater control, and the repeated occurrence of gun-related massacres, the lack of legislative

change calls for closer examination.

Since the GSS began in 1972, the question of requiring a police permit has been asked 25 times, with support for requiring a permit never dipping below 70 percent. Other reasonable steps to reduce the spread of the most destructive weapons would quite likely garner wide public agreement. Why is it that public opinion has so little effect on the issue of requiring police permits for buying a gun?

There are some social issues for which opponents express much greater intensity of feeling than proponents, for example, legalized abortion, and that helps explain the difficulties of legislative action. But this is not the case in studies of the police permit issue. In a recent study arranged by the first author, the use of three different measures of strength of

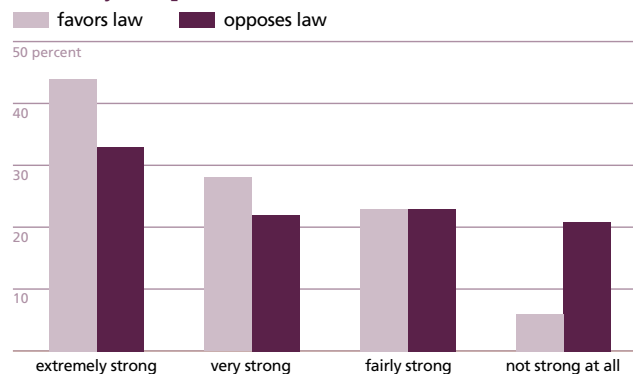
opinion provided a clear interpretation of why it is so difficult to pass legislation on the control of guns.

Our survey was carried out in 2011 by SurveyUSA, a reputable polling firm with a strong record for accuracy of election predictions. We first asked a question that gauged the level of support for legislation: “Would you favor a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before they could buy a gun, or do you think such a law would interfere too much with the right of citizens to own guns?” The results showed that 57 percent favored a gun permit requirement, and 43 percent were in opposition. This is lower than the 74 percent who favored requiring a permit in the 2010 General Social Survey, but phrasing of the question and survey administration could account



Former Vice President Dick Cheney at the 2004 NRA national convention.

### Intensity of Opinion About Gun Permit



Source: SurveyUSA, 2011